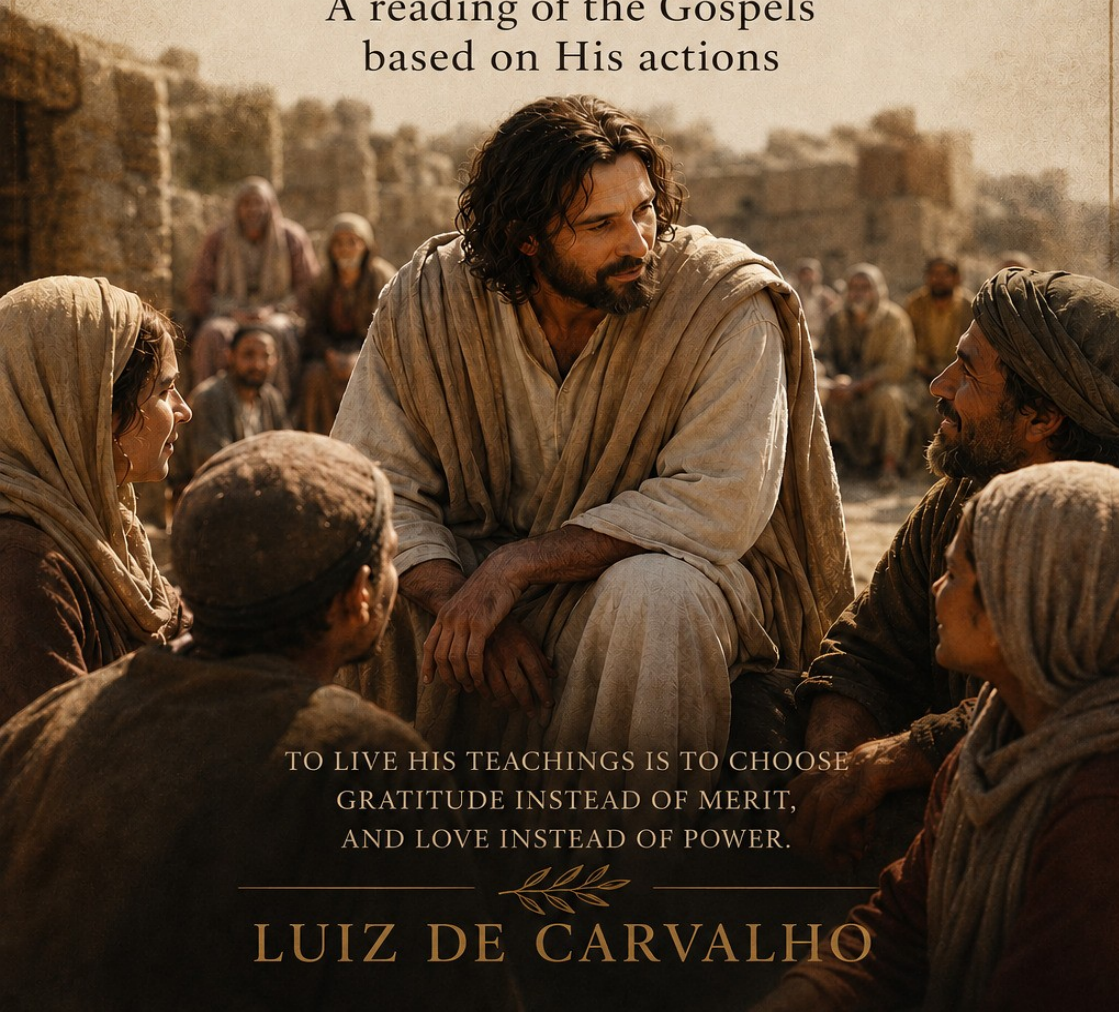
THE ETHICS OF JESUS

A reading of the Gospels
based on His actions



TO LIVE HIS TEACHINGS IS TO CHOOSE
GRATITUDE INSTEAD OF MERIT,
AND LOVE INSTEAD OF POWER.

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PREFACE

While morality crystallizes worldviews into codes and norms shaped by a particular time and place, ethics remains fluid, driven by critical reflection. More than guiding the one who acts, an ethical stance dismantles the observer's certainties, compelling them to reconsider what they once believed to be the proper response to a given situation.

It is precisely this dynamic that the Gospels and the accounts of the earliest Christian communities bear witness to. Throughout them, Jesus frequently comes into conflict with the morality and customs established in his time. In encounters, decisions, and confrontations, his actions are not grounded in rigid codes but in compassion. By refusing to conform to expectations, the logic of efficiency, or social consensus, he exposes the contradictions between the King-

dom he proclaims and the systems of power and wealth.

History shows that softening, spiritualizing, or reducing Jesus' conduct to a discourse about values removes it from the realm of confrontation and its inevitable consequences. Structures of power, both past and present, have repeatedly demonstrated a remarkable ability to preserve themselves, accumulate wealth, and legitimize violence while invoking his name. The New Testament narratives testify that fidelity to the life Jesus lived does not lead to security, success, or recognition. More often, it leads to conflict, rejection, and death, brought about by those very structures.

To read these foundational texts seriously is to accept that they do not offer comfortable shelter but demand a response. In the actions of Jesus and of early Christianity, there are no safe paths, but rather an

ethical imperative that remains alive and active, inviting the reader to reflection. In a world marked by legitimized violence, extreme inequality, institutionalized falsehood, and complicit religiosity, to remain silent or to relativize such realities is not prudence—it is a denial of the truths reported by the Evangelists.

The chapters that follow do not seek to explain Jesus from a theological perspective. Nor do they intend to reconcile his words with historical structures. Their purpose is more direct and unsettling: to draw attention to the narratives themselves and to the profoundly provocative character that emerges from them. If this reading causes discomfort, it will not be because of fabrications, distortions, or excessive rigor — although such arguments will likely become the preferred justifications of those who feel challenged by it.

1. HUMILITY AS A VIRTUE

Mary finds herself confronted with an unusual and frightening event (Lk 1:38). An unexpected messenger appears before her and proposes that she become the mother of the "Son of the Most High." Confused, she hesitates for a moment, and the messenger tells her about her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant despite having been barren. The response to this extraordinary and risky calling does not emerge from negotiation; it must be unconditional. Mary entrusts herself to the unknown:

— Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word.

Her identification as a servant does not express self-diminishment. Rather, it arises from the recognition that something greater is unfolding, even though its scope and consequences remain obscure. In the New Testament writings, the greatness of the one who serves does not lie in the exercise of control, but in openness to allow something to

come to pass without retaining mastery over what is yet to come.

Upon learning that Mary was pregnant, Joseph's response (Mt 1:18–25) belongs to the same context. The carpenter, who had legal grounds to expose his fiancée to public scandal, chose not to do so. Since "they had not lived together," the moral blame for the pregnancy would fall upon him if he failed to denounce her. Distressed, he decided to withdraw quietly, renouncing his legal right, for such a public exposure would have had devastating consequences for his betrothed.

— *Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to disgrace her publicly, resolved to dismiss her quietly.*

The justice expected of Joseph was not expressed through the punishment of another, but through the courage to bear upon himself the suffering that would otherwise fall upon his fiancée. Ultimately, through a personal revelation, he accepts the incomprehensible path before him. He entrusts himself to uncertainty and to the consequences of

what is yet to come. John the Baptist is also part of this same movement.

By lineage, John the Baptist belonged to a priestly family. As the son of Zechariah, who served in the Temple in Jerusalem (Lk 1:8; Lk 1:63), he could naturally have entered the Temple priesthood. Instead, John withdrew and chose an austere and simple life in the wilderness of Judea (Lk 1:80), where he practiced a baptism of repentance. His disciples believed that he might be the expected Messiah. John rejected the idea:

— *The one who comes after me, I am not worthy to untie his sandals.* (Jn 1:27)

This refusal is not the result of false modesty but expresses an awareness of his own limits. John understands himself as part of something greater, not as its center, even when external expectations push him in that direction. While preaching in the wilderness, his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, approaches him (Mt 3:13–17).

When Jesus submits himself to the baptism administered by John, he deepens the meaning of humble submission. By joining the line of those who confess their failings, he voluntarily places himself alongside those who acknowledge their shortcomings and limitations. The gesture breaks with any notion of a messianism connected to privilege or distance. On the contrary, the Messiah publicly and humbly presents himself as close to the human condition, relinquishing any position of exception.

On numerous occasions, he advocates humble and sincere practice rather than arrogant display. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk 18:9–14) makes explicit the contrast between these two inner attitudes. The Pharisee, a socially respected figure, presents before God a list of virtues and religious observances:

— O God, I thank you that I am not like other people... I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I earn...

The Pharisee's prayer is a self-referential monologue. The tax collector, by contrast, a socially despised

figure, remains at a distance with his head bowed, beats his chest, and says:

— O God, have mercy on me, a sinner!

The conclusion is straightforward:

— I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other.

The tax collector's humility arises from an inner necessity that leads him to acknowledge his own failure. He does not turn his life into a résumé of justification. The parable makes clear that the sincere admission of one's insufficiency becomes the acceptable starting point for reconciliation with God.

While they were traveling toward Jerusalem, the disciples argued among themselves about who would be the greatest (Lk 9:46). As soon as Jesus notices the discussion, a silent embarrassment settles among them. In a deliberate lesson, Jesus calls a child to stand beside him and declares:

— The one among you who is least will be the greatest.

The child represents someone who holds neither power nor prestige, likely approaching out of curiosity. To place the little one beside him as an example is to reject a hierarchical order based on visibility and dominance. The greatest among those who seek position is not the wisest, the strongest, or the most socially important, but the one who does not seek the central place in order to rule over others.

This inversion reaches its most concrete expression in the episode known as the Washing of the Feet (Jn 13:1–17). During the Last Supper, Jesus assumes the role of a household servant and performs a task perceived by the others as humiliating:

— He rose from the table, removed his outer garment, took a towel... and began to wash the disciples' feet.

Peter is astonished by the gesture. Jesus' response is simple and direct:

— If I have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

Implicit here is the rejection of any spirituality that confuses greatness with success or power. In a religious context often marked by the pursuit of recognition, status, and displays of supposed piety, Jesus' actions toward those who follow him point to a humble way of living, one that rejects claims to greatness and centrality.

2. MERCY AND THE CENTER

Mary—the young woman from the village of Nazareth—is pregnant and goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is also expecting a child. As soon as she sees her, the song known as the Magnificat bursts forth from her soul (Lk 1:46–55).

> *"My soul magnifies the Lord,*
>
> *and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*
>
> *for he has looked upon the humility of his servant…*
>
> *He has shown the strength of his arm; he has scattered the proud.*
>
> *He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the humble.*
>
> *He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed…"*

The feeling that springs from Mary's heart is not concerned with abstractions. It involves hunger, wealth, power, and humiliation. The center shifts toward those who

were previously invisible. The notion of a messianism associated with worldly greatness is overturned. The one who is to come will not grow up among the powerful, but in the small and despised Nazareth of Galilee, as the son of the carpenter Joseph:

— *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?* (Jn 1:46)

Jesus would confirm this understanding many times. The group that accompanies him throughout his ministry reflects the same logic of reversals. The presence of women who provide for the group's needs out of their own resources (Lk 8:1–3) breaks with deeply rooted cultural assumptions. In a context where public discourse was normatively dominated by men and women's testimony carried little or no value, the presence of “Mary Magdalene... Joanna, Susanna, and many others” points to a reordering of relationships.

The fact that they serve “out of their own means” highlights a social and economic dimension rather than hid-

den domestic assistance. Any claim to an exclusively male organization dissolves. Women are repositioned from being objects of what Jesus proposes to becoming subjects of action and collaborators in it.

When Jesus speaks of the “neighbor,” the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37) provides the answer to a listener's question: “Who is my neighbor?” The man lying by the roadside is a stranger. The representatives of the established religion—the priest and the Levite—act in a way that preserves ritual purity and personal safety, “passing by on the other side.” The agent of compassion is precisely the Samaritan, regarded as a “heretic” and “unclean.”

But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion.

Jesus concludes by asking:

— Which of the three proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?

The answer is clear, and the center becomes occupied by the one who acts mercifully, not by those who belong to the socially admired group.

In the encounter with Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1–10), this shift occurs through a public event in the life of a wealthy man who, because of his profession, stood at the margins of society. Zacchaeus climbs a tree in order to see the Master amid the crowd. Jesus looks at him and calls him by name:

— Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house!

The event is scandalous: Jesus chooses the home of a "sinner" as a place of hospitality and table fellowship. This unmerited acceptance does not absolve Zacchaeus of his unjust accumulation of wealth, but during the encounter it triggers an immediate and concrete transformation:

— Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will repay four times as much.

The reordering of economic relationships emerges as a direct consequence of being welcomed. The one who stood at the margins is not merely reintegrated but also becomes an agent of restitution. Finally, Jesus declares:

— Today salvation has come to this house!

As a result of the encounter, a change takes place — evident in the admission of wrongdoing, as well as in the sharing and restitution of what had been unjustly taken.

Jesus expands the movement of compassion and mercy and places the question of merit under scrutiny through a family dynamic in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:1–32). The younger son, who squanders his inheritance and breaks family ties, returns home after much suffering, where he encounters not proportionate punishment but immediate acceptance.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion; he ran to him, embraced him, and kissed him.

The father's action in “running to meet him” and restoring him to sonship takes place even before the son delivers any speech of repentance, revealing a grace that precedes and surpasses any assessment of merit.

— Quickly, bring the best robe and put it on him... Let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

The conflict arises from the reaction of the eldest son, who cannot accept his brother's unconditional reintegration. The redefinition of the center affects not only the one who was lost, but also those who consider themselves included by virtue of an assumed entitlement.

In summary, the center is not a fixed place protected by criteria of purity, merit, or belonging. Rather, it moves toward wherever there is need and rejection. It becomes the space where dignity is restored and relationships are mended, even though conflicts may arise from the presumption of meritorious belonging.

3. FAITHFULNESS AND RESILIENCE

Jesus' journey is marked by choices that reject immediate solutions. The resilience expressed in his actions appears as faithfulness to a way of thinking and acting that does not submit to the urgency of results. The account of the temptations in the wilderness (Lk 4:1–13) presents this mode of action in a condensed form.

Likely during the time he was with John the Baptist, he withdrew to the Judean Desert—a hostile place associated with ideas of ordeal, impurity, and death. On Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement—a scapegoat was sent there, symbolizing the removal of Israel's sins. A prolonged stay in the wilderness could produce extreme hunger, exhaustion, and hallucinations.

After a long period of fasting, Jesus feels hungry. A mysterious proposal is presented to him: to turn stones into bread. It is a shortcut capable of satisfying an immediate need. The refusal, however, is grounded in the decision not

to allow hunger to become the absolute criterion for action. An immediate solution should not be adopted simply because it is effective.

— *Man shall not live by bread alone...*

Another proposal shifts the focus to visible power. Jesus finds himself at the highest point of the Temple, from where he beholds "all the kingdoms of the world." The tempting offer of a messianic government over kingdoms presents itself as an opportunity for the rapid transformation of reality. Control of the political machinery emerges as a means to impose a new order.

The rejection of this path does not arise from indifference toward an unjust and oppressive social reality, but from the recognition that adherence to traditional structures of power would compromise the deeper meaning of the transformation being sought. This route requires submission to systems that have historically been violent and corrupting, demanding a price incompatible with the goals to be achieved.

— You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve...

Finally, spectacle presents itself as a possibility through the expectation of divine protection and public recognition. Casting oneself down from the highest point of the Temple, trusting in the direct action of God, would confer immediate credibility before the crowd. The focus shifts from the realm of faith to public demonstration and proof.

The subsequent refusal rejects the attempt to manipulate the divine will for personal gain. Resorting to spectacular acts as proof to validate belief is dismissed. Commitment must be unconditional, regardless of public approval.

— You shall not put the Lord your God to the test...

Following the wilderness experience, Jesus begins his public ministry. He does not demonstrate any clear intention of gaining credibility and followers through miraculous displays. Early in his ministry, a conflict arises in Nazareth (Mk 6:1–6; Lk 4:22–24). People look down on him because he is Mary's son and because they know his

brothers. They want him to repeat the deeds performed in Capernaum, but he refuses. Instead, he responds:

— *A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and among his own relatives... and he could do no miracle there...*

Consider also the case of the woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhagic condition for twelve years, having exhausted all her financial resources on physicians (Mt 9:20–23; Mk 5:25–34; Lk 8:43–48). She attempts to approach him amidst the crowd. Unable to reach him directly, she thinks, “If only I can touch his garments...” Upon touching him, she immediately perceives that the bleeding has ceased. Jesus stops and asks those around him who had touched him.

The healing occurs in response to the woman's faith, not as an initiative taken by Jesus for the purpose of self-promotion. Finally, he declares:

— *Your faith has saved you; go in peace.*

Consistent with the narrative of the temptation in the wilderness, as they travel toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–56), they seek lodging in a Samaritan village that refuses to receive them. James and John wish to call down “fire from heaven” to consume the inhabitants.

Jesus warns his followers against using power as a weapon of vengeance or coercion. He demonstrates the need to endure hostility and rejection without retaliation. The road to Jerusalem cannot be paved with “fire” or violence against those who refuse to welcome them.

On another occasion, after Jesus feeds a hungry crowd, the people attempt to proclaim him king (Jn 6:15). He refuses the offer and withdraws to a mountain to pray. The gesture rejects the possibility of capitalizing on collective enthusiasm.

In the Garden of Olives (Lk 22:42), resilience is tested in its most demanding form. Jesus, in his humanity, is confronted by the instinct to preserve his life and avoid

agony and death. He feels alone while the disciples sleep. He prays in tears:

— *Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me!*

He perceives the horror of the violent suffering that approaches, a punishment to be imposed by the very system of power he had rejected in the wilderness temptation. Yet he renounces the safer path:

— *Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done!*

From the temptations in the wilderness to the anguish of Gethsemane, the narratives present Jesus refusing shortcuts and remaining faithful to the path he had chosen.

4. OVERCOMING BOUNDARIES

At the well of Sychar (Jn 4:1–42), Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman. The scene brings together multiple transgressions: a Jewish rabbi initiates a conversation in a public place, with a woman who is Samaritan, and engages in an extended dialogue outside formal settings. Any one of these elements would have been sufficient to cause discomfort.

The conversation begins with a simple need —water — and unfolds without haste. Jesus neither avoids contact nor attempts to end the exchange quickly. The woman, in turn, expresses surprise at the breaking of established conventions:

— How is it that you, being a Jew, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan woman?

The question makes explicit the weight of the boundaries that separate them. Jesus neither reinforces nor explains those boundaries. The encounter continues, and it

is precisely this continuation that dissolves the separation. The relationship is built through shared time, not through the resolution of differences.

The disciples approach and observe the scene with astonishment. By the end of the episode, the woman becomes the mediator of the encounter between Jesus and her Samaritan community. The testimony she offers is grounded not in formal authority, but in the experience she lived through the encounter itself.

As we return the account of the woman who suffered from a flow of blood (Mk 5:25–34), it is important to note that she had lived in isolation for twelve years because of laws concerning ritual purity and was forbidden to touch anyone. When Jesus publicly calls her “daughter,” he lovingly breaks the social stigma that surrounded her. The act arises from compassion and transcends the ritual barriers of the time.

The breaking of barriers is also evident in Luke 7:1–10. Jesus responds to the request of a Roman officer, a rep-

resentative of the military and political power that occupied Judea and its surrounding regions. The narrative does not reduce him to his institutional role. The soldier demonstrates genuine concern for his servant. He approaches Jesus in faith, despite not being an Israelite but a foreigner—a Gentile. He assumes a posture of humility:

— Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof.

Jesus responds with public admiration. Turning to those around him, he declares:

— I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith!

The statement carries a judgment that overturns expectations: exemplary faith is found within the heart of the foreign military apparatus rather than within Israel's religious establishment. The outcome confirms that compassion cannot be contained by predetermined boundaries.

Jesus also spent time among the Gerasenes (Mk 5:1; Mt 8:28; Lk 8:26), Gentiles of Greek culture. His presence

there, however, provoked strong rejection. He caused financial loss—the death of hundreds of pigs—which alarmed the local inhabitants. They asked him to leave the region (Mk 5:17; Mt 8:34; Lk 8:37). He complied with their request, yet continued teaching in nearby cities (Mk 7:31; Mt 15:29), where he was welcomed.

While passing through the pagan region of Tyre and Sidon, a Gentile woman approaches him and desperately pleads for the healing of her daughter (Mt 15:21–28; Mk 7:24–30). Jesus does not respond immediately and even appears harsh when he says that it is not right “to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs.” She persists:

— Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.

Impressed by her answer, he responds with enthusiasm:

— Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you desire.

The perspective of overcoming boundaries is also expressed metaphorically in the parable of the Great Banquet (Lk 14:15–24). Those originally invited refuse the invitation, occupied with commitments they regard as legitimate. With seats still empty, the host sends for others, insisting that they come so that the house may be filled.

— *Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the city and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame!... Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house may be full!*

The criteria of selection are abandoned. The focus is no longer on who ought to be present, but on ensuring that the space does not remain empty. The table becomes a place of welcome even for those who stood outside the circle of social recognition.

The actions and words of Jesus consistently reveal a refusal to limit the value of human beings according to ethnic, cultural, or religious criteria. His choices cross symbolic boundaries and expose the superficiality of the divi-

sions that organized social life in his time. Differences are not eliminated. What is rejected is their use as a justification for exclusion or indifference.

The new reality that Jesus proposes is not the restoration of a militant kingdom based on ancestry and inherited beliefs, as some expected. Rather, it is the expansion of boundaries, the fulfillment of ancestral promises and prophetic announcements through the establishment of mercy and the rupture of rigid and dehumanizing patterns of action.

5. TWO MASTERS

By stating that it is impossible to serve two masters — God and Mammon, the latter personifying wealth (Mt 6:24) — Jesus is not referring to a metaphysical conflict but pointing to a practical incompatibility. Complete devotion to accumulation demands time, energy, and loyalty. It occupies the space that could otherwise be devoted to listening to others, caring for them, and sharing with them. Wealth, when made absolute, becomes the organizing principle of life.

The warning against anxiety — "Do not worry about what you will eat or wear..." (Mt 6:25–34) — does not advocate neglect of survival. Rather, it points to the burden created by the constant attempt to secure the future through accumulation. Anxiety arises from the belief that everything depends on individual control. The invitation is to relativize this assumption, making room for a way of life less centered on self-preservation.

By pointing to the “lilies of the field,” whose beauty surpasses that of King Solomon, Jesus criticizes excessive concern with material provision and teaches that anxiety about the future must not suffocate the detachment essential to the new reality he proclaims (Lk 12:27–31).

— Do not let yourselves be consumed by anxiety. The people of this world are always concerned about such things, but your Father knows what you need even before you ask.

In the parable of the Rich Fool (Lk 12:13–21), the criticism becomes explicit through the figure of a man who enjoys an abundant harvest and faces neither scarcity nor external threat. His problem arises precisely from his abundance. He needs larger barns and begins planning a future of rest and security.

— And I will say to myself, “You have plenty of goods laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry.”

Life has been reduced to an individual project of comfort and pleasure. The surprise comes when this purpose is abruptly interrupted, for death reaches him unexpectedly, revealing the fragility of existence and the inability of possessions to guarantee a secure future.

A more direct example appears in the encounter with the Rich Young Man (Mk 10:17–22). He approaches Jesus respectfully, seeks guidance, and demonstrates commitment. His question reveals a desire to do what is right. Jesus' initial response affirms his ethical path. Yet the next invitation shifts the focus entirely:

— Go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor... then come and follow me.

The point of tension lies not in the observance of rules and commandments, but in attachment to possessions. The call touches precisely the place where personal security is anchored. The young man's reaction—sorrow and withdrawal—reveals the cost of detachment. Reflecting on the episode, Jesus highlights the systemic impact of wealth:

— How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom... (Mk 10:23–31)

Jesus is clear about the fleeting nature of wealth (Mt 6:19–21), which is temporary and subject to theft and decay. He warns of the danger of attachment:

— Store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal... for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Jesus also tells a sobering parable about the fate of a rich man who ignores a poor beggar waiting for crumbs at his gate (Lk 16:19–31). Both men die, and "the poor man is carried to Abraham's side," while the other goes to "a place of torment." The one obsessed with wealth is told that he has already received the benefits of a life of luxury and abundance.

Luke does not make the reason for the condemnation entirely explicit. Indifference and hardness of heart toward the deprived and wounded man seem to be the cause, for

“even the dogs came and licked his sores” while he waited for crumbs from the rich man's table.

The Kingdom appears not merely as a future hope but as a reality that begins in the present and points to the danger inherent in one's relationship with possessions. If the heart follows the treasure, wealth can easily become an obstacle to compassion.

6. PHARISEES

In the discourses directed toward the religious leaders—the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 23)—the accusations Jesus makes focus on observable behaviors, such as seeking places of honor, enjoying public greetings, and displaying status through the adornments attached to their garments. These are ordinary gestures that reveal a constant concern with visibility and recognition.

The inconsistency becomes even more evident when the demands imposed on others are not accompanied by a similar willingness on their own part. By stating that they "tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them even with a finger," Jesus exposes a practical contradiction: religious authority is exercised without any willingness to share in the burdens it creates.

The metaphor of the cup and the dish that are clean on the outside but dirty within (Mt 23:25–26) condenses

this criticism in a striking way. Care for outward appearance stands in contrast to neglect of what lies within. The problem is the selective nature of their concern. When attention is restricted to what is visible, justice and compassion are eventually emptied of substance. The criticism intensifies even further in the discourse against Pharisaic behavior (Mt 23:27):

— *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead men's bones and every kind of impurity!*

Hypocrisy consists in playing a role, in sustaining a public identity that does not correspond to one's daily practice. It is a form of fragmentation between what is displayed and what is actually lived.

This tension also appears in the warnings concerning almsgiving, prayer, and fasting (Mt 6:1–18). In each case, the same pattern is repeated: actions that could express care and inner discipline are transformed into public perfor-

mances. The act ceases to be relational and becomes an exercise in self-display.

— *Do not practice your righteousness before others merely to be seen by them!*

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk 18:9–14), already mentioned earlier, reappears here from another perspective. The Pharisee does not lie about his condition; it is genuine. The problem is not his actions, but the way they are used to justify a presumed superiority. The tax collector, by contrast, presents no credentials. His posture is marked by the recognition of weakness, repentance, and the absence of comparison. The final reversal—in which he is justified—reinforces the criterion that runs throughout the entire critique: the rejection of outward perfection and the valuation of inner integrity.

At the banquet in the house of the Pharisee known as Simon (Lk 7:36–50), the scene is structured around the contrast between the attitude of the host and that of the

woman regarded as a sinner. Observing Jesus, Simon judges him according to categories of ritual purity:

— If you were a prophet, you would know what kind of woman is touching you.

In response, Jesus compares the Pharisee's attitude with that of the woman and gives greater credit to her for the loving gratitude she demonstrates. He exposes the coldness and deficient hospitality that fulfilled legal and social expectations while lacking genuine warmth. The confrontation reveals a religiosity that judges according to external categories and closes itself off to the gestures of vulnerability, repentance, and love manifested by the one who was despised.

During a meal in the house of another Pharisee (Lk 11:37–44), the conflict becomes explicit and public. The host is astonished that Jesus has not performed the ritual washings before eating. Jesus responds with a direct and forceful denunciation, consistent with the accusations found in Matthew 23:27:

— You Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness!

On a Sabbath, in the synagogue (Lk 13:10–17), the confrontation arises from an act of compassion that violates a strict interpretation of the Sabbath law. Jesus heals a woman who had been afflicted for eighteen years. The synagogue leader, outraged, criticizes what has happened. Jesus' reply is sharp:

— Hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey and lead it away to give it water?

The argument exposes the dehumanizing effect of the rule. Concern for the well-being of an animal was regarded as a legitimate exception to the Sabbath law, yet the liberation of a person who had suffered for many years was considered a violation.

His ethic is not grounded solely in harsh criticism; it also includes a willingness to teach those who genuinely wish to listen. In his encounter with Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee (Jn 3:1–21), Jesus engages in a lengthy night-

time conversation about the necessity of transformation. Although Nicodemus does not understand all the nuances of the discussion, he begins to follow Jesus discreetly. Later, he will help take the Rabbi's body from the cross and provide him with a dignified burial.

The severe criticisms Jesus directs toward religious figures point to a constant danger present in any religious structure. Whenever rules and rituals come to matter more than charity and mercy, religious practice deviates from its original purpose.

7. NON-RETALIATION

Gathered with his followers in a broad and level place (Lk 6:27–36), Jesus calls them to an ethic of unconditional love grounded in the very nature of God. He invites those who listen to adopt an active posture of care, generosity, and mercy toward all people.

— *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who slander you. To the one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also...*

What is proposed is a radical and unconditional love, reflecting the goodness of God:

— *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful!... If you love only those who love you, what credit is that to you?*

This teaching rejects actions based on reciprocity and compensatory justice. The act of “offering the other

cheek" is a strategy of nonviolent resistance that exposes the irrationality of aggression by refusing to mirror it. Its ultimate purpose is to break the automatic cycle of action and reaction.

This attitude is illustrated concretely in the encounter between Jesus, the woman accused of adultery, and her accusers (Jn 8:1–11). The woman is surrounded as an object of collective judgment and faces the prospect of death. Her accusers stand ready to stone her while simultaneously setting a trap for Jesus: would he deny the legitimacy of the prescribed punishment? Jesus bends down and writes something in the dust with his finger, and his response suspends the condemnation:

— *Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*

The silence that follows dismantles the logic of legitimized violence. One by one, "beginning with the oldest," the accusers depart.

The scene neither softens the wrongdoing nor minimizes whatever suffering the woman may have caused. What emerges instead is a refusal to accept summary execution as the answer. The issue is returned to the sphere of personal responsibility. The words, “Go and sin no more,” preserve the ethical demand not to harm others while rejecting the annihilation of the one who has failed.

When Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers and uses a whip to drive out the animals gathered at the entrance of the Temple (Mt 21:13), the episode can be interpreted as violent. Yet the act is one of legitimate zeal rather than personal aggression. The criticism is directed toward the religious system and those who maintain it, turning faith into an object of commerce.

— It is written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer,” but you have made it a den of thieves!

The action seeks to expose the departure from the holiness that ought to characterize the place of worship. Its

purpose is not violence as a means of self-defense or revenge.

At the moment of Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Olives, his rejection of violence becomes evident once again (Lk 22:49–51). Realizing what is about to happen, the disciples ask:

— Lord, shall we strike with the sword?

One of them cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant, and Jesus responds immediately:

— No more of this!... And touching the man's ear, Jesus healed him.

The gesture takes place at the very moment when the betrayal is completed and the arrest occurs. Healing the ear of a servant who was merely carrying out his role is a concrete act of disarmament. Jesus refuses the role of the victim who strikes back and instead acts for the benefit of the one who has come to arrest him. It is the practical expression of the command to “do good to those who hate you,” interrupting the flow of violence.

The same posture appears in Jesus' response to insults, accusations, and physical abuse throughout his final journey to the cross (Mt 27:40).

— He saved others, but he cannot save himself!... He trusted in God; let God rescue him now if he delights in him, for he said, "I am the Son of God."

His silence does not arise from inability but from conscious choice. On the cross (Lk 23:34), at the very height of the suffering inflicted by unjust violence, Jesus speaks the words no one expects:

— Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

By interceding for his executioners, Jesus offers the grace that restores relationship. The explanation—"for they do not know what they are doing"—functions as a diagnosis. Violence frequently arises from blindness and ignorance. Forgiveness therefore becomes the first intervention on behalf of those who cannot see, a freely given act that precedes any repentance.

The pattern that emerges is a progression from theory to practice and from practice to its ultimate limit. First comes the teaching that defines the contours of the love being proposed (Lk 6:27–36). Then comes its concrete application in a moment of violent crisis, where healing replaces retaliation (Lk 22:49–51). Finally comes its ultimate fulfillment: forgiveness is offered in the very act of execution (Lk 23:34).

8. SUFFERING AND PURPOSE

To speak about suffering, it is helpful to consider the example of Job. Observe his response when everything is taken from him:

Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, fell to the ground, and worshiped:

— Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. (Job 1:20–22)

Job exemplifies an attitude that acknowledges suffering as part of life, of human frailty, and above all of purposes he cannot fully comprehend. Deprived of possessions, loved ones, and health, he remained steadfast in his faithfulness. His response to suffering bears a striking resemblance to the faithfulness Jesus demonstrates toward what awaits him.

Jesus and his disciples draw near to Jerusalem. The journey is marked by warnings concerning rejection, violence, and death (Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34). These statements arise from a realistic assessment of what happens when concrete practice confronts established norms and institutions. Jesus has challenged powerful interests on numerous occasions, and suffering is anticipated as a foreseeable consequence.

The disciples' reaction reveals how difficult it is for them to accept this understanding. They still expect a glorious and triumphant form of messianism. Repeatedly, they attempt to redirect the conversation, compete for positions of prominence, or imagine solutions that preserve recognition and security (Mt 20:17–28; Mk 10:32–38; Lk 22:24–26). They do not yet perceive the contrast between expectation and the potentially adverse reality ahead: Jesus' actions are about to bring loss and suffering.

Peter's rebuke (Mk 8:32–33) makes the conflict explicit:

— Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

The attempt to divert Jesus from the path of suffering is treated as an obstacle rather than an act of care. The problem does not lie in Peter's affection, but in the alternative he proposes, one that would abandon the course established up to that point. Jesus' acceptance of suffering does not arise from an attraction to pain, but from a refusal to sacrifice integrity in exchange for relief.

The same tension reappears in the request made by the sons of Zebedee (Mk 10:35–39). Their desire for privileged positions reveals a misunderstanding of what is truly at stake. Jesus' response shifts the standard of evaluation: greatness is not associated with domination but with a willingness to bear the cost of service. Martyrdom, in this context, does not emerge as an arbitrary imposition but as an inseparable part of this way of living. Jesus alludes, in veiled language, to the suffering and violent death that await them:

— You will drink the cup that I drink and be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized.

When Jesus looks upon Jerusalem, his lament over the city (Lk 13:34–35) adds another dimension to this picture. The pain is relational. The suffering results from frustration with a city that resists change. It arises from the persistent refusal to embrace a different way of organizing human relationships and to hear the new message anticipated by the prophets:

— Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those sent to you! How often I desired to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!

During the anguished solitude of the Garden of Olives (Lk 22:42), Jesus prays while the disciples sleep. The conflict created by the instinct of self-preservation, anticipating extreme pain and a violent end, reaches its climax.

— Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me.

The prayer reveals Jesus' full humanity—his anguish and his plea—while at the same time preceding the decision that relinquishes relief and accepts the cost that lies ahead.

— Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.

After he is arrested, the confrontation reaches its decisive stage. During the trial before the high priest, he maintains his consistency, despite the severe consequences this will bring. His silence in the face of accusations and his refusal to answer provocations reinforce the path he has chosen. There is no attempt to soften his message in order to escape the impending condemnation (Mk 14:60–61).

— Have you no answer to make to these charges against you?

Suffering does not appear as something sought after or idealized. Rather, it is the consequence of choices that remain consistent even when the cost is high. The experi-

ence of pain is not presented as a virtue in itself, but as the result of remaining faithful to a way of life that comes into direct conflict with social, political, and religious expectations.

In light of Job, Jesus' posture contradicts any notion that faithfulness to God guarantees a life shielded from suffering, filled with prosperity or happiness. Through the attitude he embodies, suffering is understood as the result of both human choices and the unpredictable realities of existence.

9. THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

The early Christians embraced Jesus' teachings on detachment, love of neighbor, and the priority of mutual care, expressing them through spiritual, economic, and social practices. Luke's description of communal life (Acts 2:42–47) portrays a way of living grounded in concrete and effective actions:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... All who believed were together and had all things in common. They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, according to each one's need."

Perseverance in fellowship was also expressed through the decision to share property in order to ensure that no one remained in need. The "breaking of bread" was both the symbol and the realization of this unity, integrating worship with material sharing. Reciprocity was comprehensive. Their common faith generated mutual responsibility

that extended to every aspect of life, dissolving the distinction between “mine” and “yours” in favor of “ours” regarding basic necessities.

— *The multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul. No one claimed that any of his possessions belonged exclusively to him, but everything was held in common among them... There was not a needy person among them... and distribution was made to each according to his need.* (Acts 4:32–35)

The expression “one heart and one soul” describes an inner unity manifested through the voluntary renunciation of absolute property rights. The sale of lands and possessions, and the placing of their value at the apostles' disposal, was not a legal obligation but a generous and spontaneous response to the principle of gratuity.

The episode of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11) dramatically illustrates the seriousness of this new order. The couple sells a piece of property but keeps back part of

the proceeds while pretending to contribute the full amount. Peter's accusation is direct:

— You have not lied to men but to God...

The account serves as a warning, demonstrating that fellowship was regarded as something sacred, founded upon truthfulness and genuine self-giving.

The ideal of sharing faced logistical and cultural challenges. Commitment to the care of the most vulnerable remained central, ensuring that inclusion and equity would not be lost as the community grew.

The institution of the deacons (Acts 6:1–7) arises from a crisis in the application of this principle:

"Now in those days, when the number of disciples was increasing, a complaint arose among the Hellenists against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution."

The act of sharing required justice and solidarity beyond boundaries. The collection organized by the church in Antioch on behalf of the believers in Judea illustrates this fact (Acts 11:27–30):

"The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to send relief to the brothers and sisters living in Judea..."

The material exchange between distant groups becomes an expression of unity:

"When one member suffers, all the others suffer with it; when one member is honored, all the others rejoice with it." (1 Cor 12:26)

Paul's final testimony (Acts 20:35), given while bidding farewell to the elders of Ephesus, summarizes the spirit that animated this practice:

— In all things I have shown you that by working in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus himself, who said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Sharing mitigated the profound vulnerability inherent in the context where these relationships unfolded. By pooling resources, it was affirmed that the pain and deprivation of an individual represented a failure of the entire body, thereby transforming subsistence into a matter of unity.

The early communities, although distant, strive to uphold Jesus's ethical proposition: spiritual communion cannot be separated from material support. Mercy and charity must be present in all aspects of life.

10. GRACE AND MERIT

In the Gospels and the apostolic writings, grace does not appear as an abstract concept or a spiritual action detached from everyday life. It manifests through gratuitous initiative, as a form of acceptance that does not depend on prior performance, whereas merit can easily become an instrument of exclusion.

From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus approaches people without moral or religious credentials. He eats with tax collectors and sinners (Mk 2:15–17), touches lepers (Mk 1:40–45), speaks with women who have been pushed to the margins (Jn 4:7–26), and welcomes those regarded as impure. Acceptance is not presented as a reward for repentance. On the contrary, it creates the space in which transformation becomes possible. The sequence is clear: acceptance precedes change.

This reversal becomes particularly evident in the encounter with Zacchaeus described in an earlier chapter.

When Jesus invites himself into the tax collector's home before any sign of repentance has appeared, the crowd reacts immediately:

— He has gone to be the guest of a sinner!

Only after this act of acceptance does Zacchaeus decide to make restitution and share his possessions. The response emerges from being welcomed and embraced.

The same principle that governs the personal encounter—the primacy of gratuitous initiative over retributive calculation—appears in the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Mt 20:1–16). Those who have labored since early morning expect to receive more than those hired at the last hour. The landowner's answer completely overturns their criterion:

— Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?

There is no proportional justice here, but rather a refusal to transform the relationship into a calculation. Where merit demands comparison, grace becomes offensive.

This resistance repeatedly appears among religious groups. Whenever Jesus welcomes sinners, murmuring arises:

— This man receives sinners and eats with them! (Lk 15:2)

The criticism is directed not at the wrongdoing of those being welcomed, but at the disruption of the moral hierarchy. By suspending standards of merit, grace threatens a system in which human value is measured and ranked. It is hardly surprising that it provokes scandal.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son illustrates this conflict with particular clarity. The younger son returns in repentance without presenting any merit whatsoever. Yet he is welcomed with celebration and without prior conditions. The older son, who has remained obedient and productive, responds with indignation. His complaint is entirely coherent from the perspective of merit: years of service should secure an advantage. The father, however, refuses to turn faithfulness into a transaction.

The same pattern emerges in the encounter with the woman accused of adultery. The accusation is grounded in the law. Jesus' response does not minimize the wrongdoing, but it interrupts the mechanism of accusation. Grace does not abolish responsibility, but it prevents unworthiness from becoming a final sentence.

The rich young man approaches Jesus claiming to have kept the commandments since his youth. His moral record is beyond reproach. Yet when confronted with the call to detachment, he departs in sorrow. Attachment to meritorious achievement becomes an obstacle to the freedom Jesus offers.

Merit and grace, therefore, do not represent successive stages or complementary dimensions of the same ethic. They express irreconcilable ways of organizing value, belonging, and expectation.

This conflict also runs through the later communities that seek to follow Jesus. Whenever human worth is once again measured by performance, rules, purity, or success,

the logic of merit regains control. And with it, grace is emptied of its force.